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## William P. Marshak interview for Wright State University History Course 485

David J. Marshak

William P. Marshak

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**ORAL HISTORY PROJECT FOR HST 485  
SPRING QUARTER 2001**

**MINUTEMAN  
INSIDE THE SILO  
WITH AMERICAS NUCLEAR ARSENAL**

**Follow-up Interview**

**David J. Marshak  
Wright State University**

## FORWARD

The follow-up interview with my father about his experiences before, during, and after serving on missile crew in the 1970's did not go as I had planned. There were extremely difficult circumstances surrounding the interview, ranging from a last minute business trip by the subject to a family illness. As the situation would have it, I ended up with just a 20-minute interview. I had attempted to find an alternative interviewee and had even arranged one with a prominent Oakwood family, only to have the subject of my backup plan fail to show up for her interview. I got the interview with my father, but it was hardly what I had originally set out to achieve. I ended up having to interview him in a hospital waiting room. He had requested that I call him ahead of time with a list of the questions, which I did, and when I arrived I got some very prepared answers from him. My father has always been the "teacher," and the answers to my questions are obviously very pre-constructed responses. You can hear this plainly on the tape, and there is remarkable fluidity in the transcript. I got the sense that he wanted to touch on the very important things, but only touch on them. It was clear to me from the start that this was not something he had the time or attention for in light of the surroundings, and so I did not press the issue. At the risk of my own grade, I decided that A) there wasn't much more I could do in lieu of the Oakwood woman not showing up, and B) if my father was willing to give me 20 minutes in spite of the difficult situation he was dealing with... I was going to use those 20 minutes the best I could.

This project was not a total disaster. Even though the interview is extremely short, I would argue it is very useful as a supplement to my first effort. In 20 minutes time he managed to give me an overview of what it was like growing up in Chicago during a very turbulent era. He made reference to many significant social experiences like the Chicago race riots of 1966, his reaction to Sputnik, the integration of women into the Air Force Academy, and many other interesting experiences. While there is only so much detail that can be given in such a short time, and it was obvious he did not want this interview to end up being much longer than it was, he did provide enough words on the most significant items to give us a glimpse of his perspective. He spoke almost as though he were reading from a script, and in fact he did have several note cards. In hind site perhaps he shouldn't have received the questions in advance, but I felt that I needed to accommodate him the best I could under the circumstances. His responses were so fine-tuned at one point I even moved on before he was ready, and he made a comment about how he had a few more points to make about the subject before we could explore the next question. It seemed rushed, rehearsed, and prepared, but I don't think that these things need to be the focus of the interview. Some very interesting things were said, and all of it was genuine.

This second interview allowed me to experience just about all of the difficulties surrounding oral history in one project. If the first interview was exactly as I had planned it, this one was a complete turn around. I tried to make up for the lack of material and audio by being even more accurate in the transcription. The bottom line is that no matter what the academic fallout is of my struggles with this project, it left me with a sense that I wanted to get more. For two or three minutes worth of tape my father sliced through a topic that, under normal circumstances, he could have talked about for two or three hours. I would have enjoyed listening for two or three hours. I did my best with a difficult situation and I believe there is some very good material here.

## Transcript Outline

**In our last interview, we discussed specifically what your experiences were like on missile crew. Today, I'd like to find out a little more about who you were before and after that experience.**

- 025 Q: What was it like coming of age in the 1960's? If you can tell me a little about the climate of the era. What was it like socially?**

I grew up with the lore of the US triumph in World War II; in 1960 the war ended only 15 years before. America was locked in a Cold War with Russia, but was considered secure until a day in 1957 and a little sphere called Sputnik. Suddenly, the world was less secure and was getting even less so.

- 047 Q: Were there any very significant events that you remember most about the time? Were there any events that have affected you more deeply?**

Sputnik, Gagarin's space flight and the whole space race through the Armstrong and Aldrin's moon walk proved technology could take us places where we only dreamed of going

The Chicago race riots of summer 1966 impressed me. One day we took a wrong turn in an Allied Van Lines orange truck, and found myself in a riot in progress. I was conspicuously white while black people around me were looting, I heard shots fired, and came to understand that people saw the world differently from me.

- 097 Q: You grew up in Chicago. What was that like?**

Grew up on the South Side of Chicago (near Leroy Brown). Real estate was booming because block busting generated lots of commissions. Mayor Daley ran the city and dead people voted regularly and often.

- 120 Q: What was everyday life like when you joined the military? We discussed your schedule on the missile crew, but what was family life like?**

Disrupted. My wife Sharon had and raised two sons pretty much without me. Our Siberian Husky Sassy was her companion and friend.

- 145 Q: What was life like in Grand Forks? I've heard North Dakota compared to the moon in the past!?!**

We lived near or on Grand Forks AFB, about 10 desolate miles from the city of Grand Forks. Like most small towns, there wasn't much to do. We ate out, partied, or saw a movie for recreation. I've seen the curvature of the earth; there aren't many places you can see that. Civilization wasn't too far away, as Winnipeg Manitoba was only 1.5 hours north.

- 152 Q: You mentioned Mom wanted you to join the crew, how did she feed about your schedule/duties once you were on?**

Sharon did not want me to join missile crew, she wanted me stationed stateside and she wanted the medical coverage for Doug's birth. She hated missile crew, the separations and the lonely times took their toll.

- 170 Q: When did your crew duty end and what was your next assignment in the AF?**



I was ready to quit the Air Force during the 3<sup>rd</sup> year on missile crew, I was ready to take an early out and quit. My prior masters degree identified me as eligible for a teaching assignment at the USAF Academy. Strategic Air Command refused to release me, but 3 years, 9 months into the tour, summer 1976, we moved to the Academy in Colorado Springs.

- 181 Q: You told me in the past that you spent time teaching in the AF Academy. You were there when they first integrated women. That must have been interesting?**

The process went well, but was difficult. The Superintendent did not oppose integration like at West Point, sometimes overcompensating for the women. Men got heavier M1 rifles and women got lighter M16. There were howls of protest, so they gave everyone the lighter M16s. The males complained it made training easier.

Officers got in trouble for hitting on cadets. Cadets got in trouble for prohibited sexual behavior. Sometimes it was humorous and sometimes sad.

- 244 Q: In the 1980's you were transferred to Wright Patterson AFB. What was your position here? What kinds of work were you doing?**

I served as a bench scientist, branch chief overseeing 15 scientists and engineers, and deputy division chief for 150 people.

- 265 Q: Have you ever been inside Hanger 18??? Really? Do you think it exists?**

There are activities the government conducts which it necessarily keeps from its population. Having had clearance to such classified activity, I can attest the need to withhold the information.

- 280 Q: You're now a retired Lt. Colonel, working for SYTRONICS Inc., a private military contractor. What kinds of things do you do there? What is your position? What are you working on now?**

I am Chief Scientist for SYTRONICS, one of three Ph.D.s working on military related research and supporting our commercial endeavors.

*Interview Transcript*

**In our last interview, we discussed specifically what your experiences were like on missile crew. Today, I'd like to find out a little more about who you were before and after that experience.**

**025 Q: What was it like coming of age in the 1960's? If you can tell me a little about the climate of the era. What was it like socially?**

My preteen years ended as the 60's began. I grew up with the lore of the US triumph in World War II; in 1960 the war ended only 15 years before. America was locked in a Cold War with Russia, but was considered secure until a day in 1957 and a little sphere called Sputnik. Suddenly, the world was less secure and was getting even less so. Internationally, Francis Gary Powers, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Space Race, and endless client wars (especially Viet Nam) peppered the decade. Culturally, assassinations, race riots, rock & roll, hippies, and the sexual revolution prevented any semblance of stability. People still defined themselves in cultural icons, there were just so many to choose from. I defined myself as a student and an athlete, in that order. I was never great at either, but was good enough to contribute in both domains. I tried to go Ivy League like my brother and failed. I went first to U. of Arizona where you could not be both a student and athlete. A year later I enrolled at a small college, Lawrence University, where I could be both.

**047 Q: Were there any very significant events that your remember most about the time? Were there any events that have affected you more deeply?**

Sputnik, Gagarin's space flight and the whole space race through the Armstrong and Aldrin's moon walk proved technology could take us places



where we only dreamed of going. I got to ride the gantry to the top of the Vehicle Assembly Building with Apollo 15/Saturn 5; in most ways we have moved past that technology but we have never exceeded its psychological impact.

The Chicago race riots of summer 1966 impressed me. I worked for a moving company moving school equipment. One day we took a wrong turn in an Allied Van Lines orange truck, and found myself in a riot in progress. I was conspicuously white while black people around me were looting, I heard shots fired, and came to understand that people saw the world differently from me. Two black kids tried to mug me. My high school integrated from 5% minority to 50% minority over the 4 years. I nearly started a race riot at a high school football game when I went offside to hit a black ghetto school quarterback who badmouthed my team over the line of scrimmage; won the fight and lost the game. Playing football with and against blacks taught me to judge people by their actions and not their faces.

Campus in the late 60's was hotbeds of political opposition to Viet Nam. In winter of 1969, I was sneaking out of my girlfriend's (now my wife) dorm and saw a light behind the wood frame house that contained the Air Force ROTC unit. I went to investigate to see a man run into the adjacent men's dorm. He yelled get out of there. I looked anyway and saw a lit gas can burning on top of a propane tank. I had to convince a kissing couple to let me back into the girls' dorm, called the fire department, got interviewed by the FBI, and was convinced that violent opposition to the war was wrong. That spring I "lost" the draft lottery and that ROTC detachment gratefully helped me apply to join which I attended during graduate school.

**097 Q: You grew up in Chicago. What was that like?**

Grew up on the South Side of Chicago (near Leroy Brown). Real estate was booming because block busting generated lots of commissions. Major Daley ran the city and dead people voted regularly and often. Graduate of Chicago Public Schools, had my teeth modified by bullies, had very some great teachers in old schools. Dr. Margaret Annon taught me in A.P. English to be a sentiment person. Mr. Ralph Hegener, my football coach, taught me I could physically do things I didn't think I could.

My college summers I worked hard to pay for college. I got a lesson in how the world worked with the moving company. We moved desks from white schools, took the pullouts to a black school, and took their pullouts to a Puerto Rican school. That is trickle down economics. Two summers were spent as a bricklayer's tender; there are several apartment buildings in Palatine that I can say I carried 1/3 of them.

**120 Q: What was everyday life like when you joined the military? We discussed your schedule on the missile crew, but what was family life like?**

ROTC at Miami of Florida was strange. We wore uniforms only for drill to maintain a low profile. It was 1970 and Viet Nam was winding down. The universities through out the country kicked the military off their campuses (just as it had been done at Lawrence). The draft was unfair to the poor and when it was done away with, college educated had to decide to obey their conscious or the law. I was the only one of my generation to serve in the military. Every one of my uncles who were old enough served in World War II.

Disrupted. My wife Sharon had and raised two sons pretty much without me. Our Siberian Husky Sassy was her companion and friend. It made us value our time together more, but it also took away our love's innocence. I



was within 2 days of going out on alert for 3 days. When I came home I was wiped for a day having worked midnight to eight. Our first year was off base in apartments, where Sharon was isolated from military life. Next 3 years were on base, where we developed lifelong friends, helped each other when husbands were on alert, and suffered the separation, pressure to perform and responsibility for nuclear weapons together.

**145 Q: What was life like in Grand Forks? I've heard North Dakota compared to the moon in the past!?!**

We lived near or on Grand Forks AFB, about 10 desolate miles from the city of Grand Forks. Like most small towns, there wasn't much to do. We ate out, partied, or saw a movie for recreation. I had unique experiences. I stood on a levee/road near a slough and saw 10,000 geese and ducks climb into the sky migrating south; the honking was deafening. I've seen the curvature of the earth; there aren't many places you can see that. Civilization wasn't too far away, as Winnipeg Manitoba was only 1.5 hours north. Golfing was tough. I took my father and brother-in-law to the base course during a visit. When you paused to putt, mosquitoes (state bird, telephone is state tree) turned your arms black!

**152 Q: You mentioned Mom wanted you to join the crew, how did she feed about your schedule/duties once you were on?**

Sharon did not want me to join missile crew, she wanted me stationed stateside and she wanted the medical coverage for Doug's birth. She hated missile crew, the separations and the lonely times took their toll. We were separated around 50% of time, constantly saying hello and goodbye. It was very hard on her.

**170 Q: When did your crew duty end and what was your next assignment in the AF?**

I was ready to quit the Air Force during the 3<sup>rd</sup> year on missile crew, I was ready to take an early out and quit. My prior masters degree identified me as eligible for a teaching assignment at the USAF Academy. Strategic Air Command refused to release me, but 3 years, 9 months into the tour, summer 1976, we moved to the Academy in Colorado Springs.

**181 Q: You told me in the past that you spent time teaching in the AF Academy. You were there when they first integrated women. That must have been interesting?**

The summer of '76, the first women were enrolled in the AFA entering freshmen or "Doolie" class. When I first arrived, the Air Force did not want to research the integration; if you don't want to hear the answer, don't ask the question. Then, a newspaper article describes project Athena at West Point to study integration. Suddenly, the Superintendent needed research done (Air Force would never let the Army do something it wouldn't do). I was assigned because I was available, and I knew statistics. A civilian professor, a sociologist from Washington State on sabbatical, would head the project but not arrive till fall.

I was given an Army survey which I "blue-suited" (with Army permission) and added an open ended question (important later). It was given to the entering class and upper class cadre. The open-ended question contained such venom that the Department Head and chief of research didn't want to brief the generals. I insisted on it, so they decided I would give the briefing! I had just pinned on captain, and I would brief a one-star and three-star generals!



During an item by item discussion, the generals are relieved to know entering freshmen males and upper class males were equally chauvinistic. They were relieved that they were not training them to be chauvinistic; Congress is responsible for appointments. Apparently, traditional military career aspirations correlates with chauvinism. As the briefing ended, by bosses sitting in the back of the room was obviously tense about the open-ended responses, which I had arranged in ascending venom. I put the first of six up and there was a gasp! The second drew a smaller gasp and the third through sixth drew silence. When I concluded the briefing, you could hear a pin drop. The three-star general finally spoke and said he had no idea the males were so emotional about the integration and thanked me for providing the open response. Needless to say, my bosses were relieved and grateful. I would be named to get my doctorate that spring. The project was carried out by others over the next eight years, following the class even after graduation. It would borrow from military and civilian racial integration, explaining much of the data using cognitive dissonance theory.

The process went well, but was difficult. The Superintendent did not oppose integration like at West Point, sometimes overcompensating for the women. Men got heavier M1 rifles and women got lighter M16. There were howls of protest, so they gave everyone the lighter M16s. The males complained it made training easier.

Officers got in trouble for hitting on cadets. Cadets got in trouble for prohibited sexual behavior. Sometimes it was humorous and sometimes sad. One freshman women cadet, when informed in human biology that semen was primary glucose, asked, "Why does it taste so salty?" The class broke up and could not be restarted. Four years later at graduation she got a standing ovation from her class, to the confusion of the audience beyond the faculty.



On the sad side, a female cadet complained to the Office of Special Investigation that she had been forced to submit to oral sex. She had willingly performed it the previous night, but the male came back to force her. Although the Uniform Code of Military Justice was explained in detail to each cadet, she apparently unaware that the blue law aspects meant she had confessed in the voluntary act to a felony. Both male and female were dismissed.

The first pregnant female tried to hide it so she could have the baby during the summer. The Superintendent received weekly briefings on her health, but could not compel her to take a pregnancy test. She had the baby premature, but healthy and was dismissed. Males regularly married pregnant brides during graduation week. Her case led to changing the rules, allowing females who gave their babies up for adoption (cadets can be neither married or have children), they could rejoin the following class.

**244 Q. In the 1980's you were transferred to Wright Patterson AFB. What was your position here? What kinds of work were you doing?**

I served as a bench scientist, branch chief overseeing 15 scientists and engineers, and deputy division chief for 150 people. My work included development and deployment of camouflage, concealment and deception, studies in workload, human engineering of bomber cockpit and training, flew as an observer in several military aircraft and conducted classified flight research. I retired from the Air Force in 1996.

**265 Q: Have you ever been inside Hanger 18??? Really? Do you think it exists?**

There are activities the government conducts which it necessarily keeps from its population. Having had clearance to such classified activity, I can attest the need to withhold the information. I do not believe aliens are being held by the government, but I have no direct knowledge.

The best explanation I have heard for the Hanger 18 myth comes from the 50's research into the effects of g-forces. Bears, baboons and chimpanzees were used in live experiments to support ejection research. The ethics of the animal work might be questioned, but pilots were being killed and crippled in jet aircraft accidents and the work was for their benefit. As the story goes, several animal subjects were stored in a hanger and forgotten for years. Power was lost and the animal remains deteriorated. When finally discovered, the small figures were mistaken for otherworldly. This is the best explanation I have ever heard for the myth of Hanger 18.

**280 Q: You're now a retired Lt. Colonel, working for SYTRONICS Inc., a private military contractor. What kinds of things do you do there? What is your position? What are you working on now?**

I am Chief Scientist for SYTRONICS, one of three Ph.D.s working on military related research and supporting our commercial endeavors.

I've spent the last five years doing original research to support Army command and control employment of computers. We have developed metrics for measuring multi-modal display formats, we have developed new display technology permitting stacking information in depth, we have developed ways of distorting visual scales to pack more information on the displays, studied land navigation aided by wearable computers, Global Positioning System, and head-mounted displays. We have also done field evaluation of intelligent aiding and planning.

I design and conduct research, develop new ideas for displays and controls, perform evaluations and evaluate outcomes statistically. The military wants to exploit information technology as a force multiplier, but significant challenges in human-computer interface have prevented full exploitation of that technology. SYTRONICS conducts research to overcome those limitations.